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Narrating Revolutionary Failure in Sylvain Maréchal and Vincenzo Cuoco: The
Legend of Pythagoras

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly assumed that the Terror marked the end of revolutionary experiments with antiquity. Sources from antiquity however remained powerful conceptual tools, especially for those revolutionaries seeking to examine the Revolution's failure and imagine alternative political futures. This article is a comparative study of Sylvain Maréchal's *Voyages de Pythagore* (1798) and Vincenzo Cuoco's *Platone in Italia* (1806). Both writers turned to antique sources in order to analyse how the Revolution could be corrected and performed again. Their search for indigenous sources of revolution and reflections on agency and voice would prove influential for subsequent revolutionary theories, including those of anarchism and 'passive revolution'.

Keywords: French Revolution, antiquity, Pythagoras, indigenous liberties, anarchism, passive revolution, Sylvain Maréchal, Vincenzo Cuoco, agency, voice.

The problem of assessing the revolutionary uses of antiquity has long been recognized. References to antiquity abound in the works of the major *philosophes* and constituted a major component of the educational background of many revolutionaries. The *goût antique*, prominent since the mid eighteenth century, left a lasting imprint on institutional nomenclature, festivals, theatre and art of the revolutionary period. As is well known, this revival of antiquity reached a peak following the deposition of the King in 1792 and the subsequent establishment of France's First Republic.¹ Yet the prevalent critical opinion has long been that antiquity constituted the 'décor' and not the fundamental orientation of the revolutionaries, who, for the most part, concurred that the ancient republics of Greece, Sparta and Rome were of limited application to a

¹ See Antoine de Baecque, 'The Allegorical Image of France, 1750-1800: A Political Crisis of Representation', *Representations* 47 (1994): 111-43; Claude Mossé, *L'Antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989); Jacques Bouineau, *Les Toges du pouvoir, ou la révolution de droit antique* (1789-1799) (Toulouse, Editions Eché, 1986).

modern, populous country such as France.² Such a perspective tends to assume that revivals of antiquity, even if intense, were not in themselves generative of new political content. Recently, however, this thesis has been revised by a number of scholars considering anew the relevance and centrality of imaginative re-workings of antiquity, particularly republicanism.³ Even when such reworkings did not translate into actual policies, a reflection on ancient societies gave revolutionaries and reformers throughout Europe powerful conceptual tools to analyse the present and imagine alternative political futures.

Arguably, this experimental attitude was stronger in the phases of the Revolution that followed the Terror, when ancient sources were sifted through for alternatives to Greek and Roman models that were too closely associated with Jacobinism. The period after the fall of Robespierre is typically associated with a slow-down of revolutionary activity and an ‘emptying out’ of references to antiquity.⁴ Yet, within France an idealized antiquity continued to inform the Directory’s understanding of its own constitution. For instance, the two assemblies created by the Constitution of 1795 retained the ancient names of *Conseil des Anciens* and *Conseil des Cinq-Cents*, and deputies famously draped themselves in antique togas. And while Napoleon’s ascendancy was cast as a return to political realism, antiquity remained an

² See Harold Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937) and Chantal Grell, *Le dix-huitième siècle et l’antiquité en France, 1680-1789* (Oxford: SVEC/Voltaire Foundation, 1995), pp.1185-6.

³ For republicanism see Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2008); Beatrice da Vela and Benjamin Earley, ‘Senatus and Sénat: the reception of the Roman Senate during the Radical Stage of the French Revolution (1792–4)’ *Classical Receptions Journal* (2015): 46-63; see also Keith Baker, ‘Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France’ *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 32-53.

⁴ See Grell, pp. 1182-83.

important reference for dissident groups and critics of the new regime.⁵ Outside France, the Revolution's explosive outward radiation brought nations in direct contact with revolutionary ideals – including the desire to relive antiquity – that historically, had been associated with their own national past. Italy in particular offers a useful comparative perspective as both the classical homeland of republicanism and an unfree land submitted to French control. Antiquity thus became a contested ground between local voices seeking to reaffirm national pride in Italy's glorious past, and influential images of ancient Italian history coming from revolutionary and later imperial France. This raises the question of how to jointly consider this reconceptualization of antiquity both inside and outside France after 1795, a moment when the very notion of a revolutionary rupture with the past was reconceived by radical writers on both sides of the border. In other words, far from signalling the end of revolutionary activity, the late 1790s can also be associated with a movement that attempted to re-activate the horizon of antiquity in the name of a more ancient past – a pure origin.

This paper considers how antiquity was reconceived under the Directory and the first years of the Napoleonic Empire by radical writers who believed that the Revolution had not lived up to its promises and therefore had to be performed again, in a different form. It proposes a comparative study of two texts: Sylvain Maréchal's *Voyages de Pythagore* (1798-99), a six-volume work whose resemblance to Vincenzo

⁵ As Lucien Napoléon observed: '...les principes, par lesquels on a pu gouverner une bourgade de Laconie, ne sauraient convenir à un grand peuple, chez qui le commerce, le luxe, les arts ont introduit une foule de besoins'. Cited by Albert Mathiez, *La Théophilanthropie et le culte décadaire* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1904), p. 592. A notorious dissident group is the *barbus*, former students of David who dressed as Pythagoras and sought a 'purer' source of antiquity in opposition to their former teacher who they accused of turning 'rococo'. See M.E.J. Delécluze, *Louis David et son temps* (Paris: Didier, 1855).

Cuoco's epistolary historical novel *Platone in Italia* (1806) has been noted but, to our knowledge, never pursued. Sylvain Maréchal, well-known for his militant, atheist views, had participated in the Conspiracy of Equals, the first 'revolution' against the revolutionary state, and authored, with Babeuf, the *Manifeste des Egaux*, a key influence, through Buonarroti, on the development of Italian Jacobinism. Naples-educated Vincenzo Cuoco, by contrast, belonged to the moderate front of democratic reformers whose primary aim was the emancipation and unification of Italy. Since the late sixteenth century Naples had been home to a lively intellectual tradition that combined French influences and indigenous thought, and produced such original works as Vico's *New Science* and the legal philosophy of Gaetano Filangieri. Well acquainted with the ideas of constitutionalism and rights promoted by the Neapolitan Enlightenment, Cuoco was part of the following generation of reformists who saw these ideals put to the test by war and revolution.⁶ Cuoco took part in the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799 and wrote his most famous work, the *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana del 1799* (1801; 1806) while exiled in France and Milan. Then, in 1798 and 1806 respectively, both Maréchal and Cuoco turned from more explicitly topical writings to the same arcane theme, the legend of Pythagoras. Casting a shadow over both texts is Abbé Barthélemy's 1787 *Voyages de Jeune Anarcharsis*, an acknowledged inspiration for both writers. How, then, was the genre of the antiquarian journey reworked by a new generation, the first to have lived through the revolution?

⁶ On Cuoco's critique of Filangieri see Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Politics of Enlightenment: Republicanism, Constitutionalism and the Rights of Man in Gaetano Filangieri* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2014), pp. 153-75. On Naples as a case study for the transmission and development of Enlightenment ideas see John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Although it seems likely that Cuoco should have encountered Maréchal's work, perhaps during his exile in Marseille or in Savoy, no direct influence has been documented.⁷ Nevertheless, a comparative approach highlights striking analogies between two thinkers whose influence on the revolutionary thought of the nineteenth century has been recognized. Both Maréchal and Cuoco turn to the Pythagorean legend to reject the perceived misconstrual of antiquity by the Jacobins and, by extension, to analyse the Revolution's failure. And both do so to variously critique or promote a nationally-specific image of society: Maréchal to criticize the France of the Directory and the Consulate; Cuoco to establish an authoritative Italian version of ancient history in response to interpretations coming from France. Moreover, they both do so in the name of a more primitive, authentic antiquity, with Cuoco making the surprising suggestion that the ancient Italic peoples (and not Greece) were the source of Pythagoreanism and, by extension, all classical culture and therefore the true reference point for any future social reform. As Cuoco's revisionism makes clear, what is at stake in both texts is the search for indigenous sources of revolution. How can a revolution bring about change without it being imposed from above or from the outside? What principles of continuity would have to be observed to prevent a reaction and counter-revolution? Who would encourage and control it, especially given the mostly unenlightened state of local populations?

Although the solution of these two writers to such conundrums proved to be quite different, a comparative analysis allows us to establish the similarities and differences between two thinkers whose respective outlooks anticipate much subsequent revolutionary theory and practice. Maréchal is known as one of the first

⁷ For a parallelism between Cuoco and Maréchal see Paolo Casini, *L'antica sapienza italica: Cronistoria di un mito* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1998), p. 249; and Antonino De Francesco, *Vincenzo Cuoco: una vita politica* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1997), pp. 80-81.

anarchists. He advocated not just the abolition of private property but also offered one of the first critiques of the revolutionary state, arguing as early as 1791 that that revolutionary government was a contradiction in terms, a line that Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon would subsequently pursue.⁸ For his part, Cuoco turned to Pythagoras to further probe the idea of a ‘passive revolution’ that he had introduced in the *Saggio storico*. In particular, a central question he asks in *Platone in Italia* is how one might bring about revolutionary change while maintaining an organic link with the traditional customs, institutions, and beliefs of a nation or community. As is well known the concept of ‘passive revolution’ had far-reaching consequences: it inspired Gramsci’s assessment of the Risorgimento and his understanding of the role of culture and media in bringing about gradual political and social transformations.⁹

A POLITICAL ANTIQUARIANISM

Both Maréchal and Cuoco draw on a traditional body of knowledge on Pythagoras dating back to antiquity. The legend of a Pythagorean magisterium in Southern Italy, which contributed to the flourishing of Magna Graecia and directly influenced the course of Greek history, was transmitted by ancient historiographers such as Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, and through Neoplatonic circles. Testimonies are found in Aristotle, and Cicero emphasises its impact on Plato during the latter’s travels in Magna Graecia.¹⁰ Throughout late antiquity and the middle ages, the occultist legend of the Pythagorean sect fascinated the humanists. The Italian *quattrocento* saw a

⁸ See *Dame-Nature à la barre de l'Assemblée nationale* (Paris: 1791), pp. 17, 43. and *Correctif à la Revolution* (Paris: Imprimerie du cercle sociale, 1793), pp. 20-1.

⁹ See Luisa Mangoni, ‘La genesi delle categorie storico-politiche nei “Quaderni del Carcere”’, *Studi storici* 3 (1987): 573.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 985b23, 987a31, 989b29. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5-9. The authenticity of Plato’s journey is disputed, see Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 155-71.

revival of interest in the figure of Pythagoras, in the context of a philosophical syncretism that embraced ancient forms of knowledge in contrast to Christian orthodoxy.¹¹ As Frank Manuel observes, after the Renaissance, the notion that the ancient founders of mysteries were right to withhold the truth led to the development of deist versions of the double-truth doctrine, namely that in every society there are two religions, one for the rational few and one for the credulous masses. The double-doctrine was central to John Toland, David Hume and the majority of the ‘philosophes’ before the Holbachians argued that the sovereign could dispense with the church altogether.¹² Both aspects of Pythagoreanism – as esoteric opposition to official culture and as protection for reformers and men of reason – would play an important role in both Maréchal’s and Cuoco’s versions of the myth. In distinct but related ways, Maréchal and Cuoco recreate Pythagoras for the revolutionary age in order to correct and supersede the revolutionary strategy that had led to the failures of the Jacobin regime and the Neapolitan Republic.

However, for the contemporary reader, these hefty volumes blending together antiquarian and literary materials, are rebarbative. Dry and digressive, stuffed with remote, seemingly erudite disquisitions, they seem incapable of communicating the energy of the revolutionary struggle. This is all the more surprising given that this reactivation of antiquity captures both Maréchal and Cuoco at one of the most uncertain moments of their highly eventful, intense lives. Maréchal wrote his *Voyages de Pythagore* shortly after the failed Conspiracy of Equals that saw Babeuf and Darthé guillotined for treason. Cuoco himself had narrowly escaped the death sentence for his involvement in the events of 1799, and set to work on *Platone in*

¹¹ See Casini, pp. 35-68, 122.

¹² Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 66-68

Italia at a time of forced political inactivity, when Murat had purged the newly founded Italian Republic of the more patriotic elements on suspicion of anti-French propaganda.¹³ Both texts thus capture their authors looking back at dangerous moments as well as looking forward in time, attempting to hold open a revolutionary vision against increasing pressure towards closure.

This attitude becomes clear if we consider the tone of regret and recrimination that characterizes both texts. Maréchal makes clear that even in Pythagoras's own time the golden age was long past. As Pythagoras's teacher says: 'La société civile s'est emparé des plus beaux sites, des campagnes les plus fécondes; elle n'a laissé d'intacts que les déserts sablonneux.'¹⁴ The Greek itinerary is presented as a ruin, a panorama of enslaved peoples. Even Sparta, acknowledged as 'la première république de la Grèce et du monde' is nothing but a military republic, externally founded on the colonization and oppression of its neighbours and internally divided into a free minority and impoverished majority.¹⁵ It appears that everywhere and at every historical moment in time 'le règne de la liberté n'est que de quelques instants, et ne convient qu'au très petit-nombre'.¹⁶ The only pure origin lies in unconquered, autochthonous peoples such as the Gauls before their contact with the Phonicians from Marseille. The primitive Gauls are both truly free and thoroughly cosmopolitan and this on account of their nomadic culture and lack of private property: 'Tout le

¹³ De Francesco, p. 78.

¹⁴ Maréchal, *Voyages*, I, p. 58.

¹⁵ Maréchal accentuates the relation of rich and poor: 'En entrant à Sparte, je m'attendais à trouver le règne de l'égalité. Quelle a été ma surprise d'y voir un certain nombre de familles opulentes, et le reste des citoyens dans la misère', *Voyages*, IV, p. 80.

¹⁶ Maréchal, p. 91.

globe du monde est la propriété des Gaulois, et ils ne sont pas propriétaires d'une seule coudée de terrain'.¹⁷

A similar tone resurfaces at the beginning of Cuoco's narrative. As their boat sails silently into Tarentum, Plato warns his young companion Cleobolus that all cities are equally unjust: everywhere you will find

a small number of wise men preaching virtue and truth to the people [*al volgo*] to no avail; and everywhere the majority persecuting wise men in order to follow the sway of passions, and later regretting not heeding their teaching.

This is the history of all mankind.¹⁸

From the very start, the trope of the travel narrative is subverted: instead of a journey of discovery, what the novel offers is the realisation that all places are essentially the same, and that no ideal societies exist where people will voluntarily adopt the reformers' plans. Cuoco clearly writes something of his own experience into Plato's self description as a political exile who has been forced by necessity to become a 'citizen of the universe', after witnessing the failure of enlightened reform and his friend and teacher put to death. The tragic defeat of the Neapolitan Revolution casts a shadow on the entire novel, which can be interpreted as an extended, sometimes confused reflection on past mistakes, as the idealist Cleobolus is confronted with classical principles of political realism that challenge the utopian optimism of the 1790s and Enlightenment ideas about human goodness and perfectibility.

In an obvious sense, then, these texts can be situated in relation to the internal politics of France and Italy. Cuoco's portrayal of Magna Graecia and the Samnium on the brink of losing their independence has chiefly been read as an allegory of the predicament of the young Italian Republic created by Napoleon, with the sage

¹⁷ Maréchal, v, p. 160.

¹⁸ Cuoco, p. 15. [All translations from Italian are by Mucignat].

Archytas standing in for the Republic's moderate vice-President Francesco Melzi d'Eril, and the high-handed Roman army representing the French.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Maréchal's depiction of Sparta as a regime in which dedication to the law trumps even loyalty to virtue can be interpreted as a critique of the Jacobin regime. More generally, his interpretation of Spartan decadence reads like a description of post-Thermidorean France:

Il semble que la législation de Lycurgue n'ai été qu'un simple objet de curiosité. Le peuple de Sparte, semblable à tous les autres, épris de la nouveauté, a essayé de ces lois pendant quelques années. Le voilà qui s'en détache peu à peu; il fait des sièges et des conquêtes; il creuse des ports; élève des fortifications, toutes choses défendues par le suprême ordonnateur de la république.²⁰

In a veiled allusion to Napoleon he criticizes Sparta for being, not a republic, but a 'gouvernement militaire; Lycurgue paraît n'avoir voulu qu'un peuple soldat. Je ne vois pas de citoyens parmi vous'.²¹

But while it is the case that each text uses antiquity as a vehicle for political commentary, a closer analysis takes us beyond a direct correspondence to current events. For it forces us to consider the *theoretical* uses of antiquity, both as a means of analysing the failures of the revolutionary experiment and of holding open the revolution as a still possible field of action. Three aspects of this theory concern us here: the emphasis on an autochthonous revolution; the question of whether and to what extent to engage the popular masses in the process of social and political

¹⁹ Annalisa Andreoni, 'Un "immortale romanzo italiano"', in Cuoco, *Platone*, pp. lxxvii-lxxxvii. The identification of Archytas with Melzi is based on a passage in the Dedication.

²⁰ Maréchal, *Voyages*, IV, p. 84.

²¹ Maréchal, p. 75.

change; the relation between revolutionary thought and its expression, that is to say, between the theoretical reason of the enlightened few and the beliefs of the many.

THE INDIGENOUS SOURCES OF LIBERTY

The most original aspect of Maréchal's and Cuoco's presentation of Pythagoras is their emphasis on his role as a political leader and lawmaker. This stands in sharp contrast to the legend emerging from late ancient sources of a semi-divine Pythagoras, who performed miracles and oversaw religious rituals. Both texts take a critical stance against this false glorification of Pythagoras and attempt to ascertain the practices of the actual Pythagorean school. At the same time, it is undeniable that Pythagoras also functions foremost as a heuristic device. Maréchal uses Pythagoras to illuminate the distant past beyond the historical record, in order to analyse how social divisions came to be instituted out of an original state of natural equality. Pythagoras is made to travel more widely than the historical evidence allows and to encounter many more peoples, ranging from the inhabitants of Sri Lanka to the Druids of the far north. Pythagoras is thus used to investigate the difference between the 'time of foundations' – for Maréchal the minimal set of natural laws that govern all human association – and the 'time of institutions', the ways in which these natural, material conditions come to be authorized in the form of norms, customs, laws and practices. At the same time, Maréchal's Pythagoras serves a resolutely contemporary purpose insofar as he also offers means of resisting the post-revolutionary social order. A reformer without a doctrine or code, he operates by direct action alone. For although he founded a school for legislators, he himself did not write any canon of law. Rather he is hailed as the initiator of a self-governing society, one that functions exclusively through the establishment of norms – habits of living – rather than positive law. Chief amongst

these norms is the voluntary dispossession of private property.²² Through the abolition of property and the embrace of communal living, Pythagoreans demonstrate that a state of equality can exist – in the here and now – as an ‘égalité de fait et non simple fiction de la loi’.²³ As Maurice Dommanget observes, in the *Voyages* Maréchal rejects the Babouviste attempt to create a true revolution ‘in the here and now’ and returns to the conviction expressed in his 1791 *Dame Nature à la barre de l’Assemblée Nationale* that a true revolution requires not new laws and constitutions but rather time and education. Revolution is not fit for the masses but only for a small society of reasonable men, organized around the domestic family unit.²⁴

Cuoco on the other hand adopts a more emphatically nationalist inflection, finding in the Pythagoras story new evidence for the (equally fantastic) notion that Greek culture derives from a nobler and more ancient Italic civilization.²⁵ In a bout of philological enthusiasm, Cuoco opens what we might call a ‘Pythagorean question’, positing that Pythagoras might not have existed as a real historical person but more as the manifestation of a ‘knowledge system’ that was the collective inheritance of the Italic people.²⁶ This insistence on a nativist interpretation serves a polemical purpose. In 1799, Cuoco had criticised the constitutional project drawn up by the Neapolitan Jacobins for being ‘too French and not Neapolitan enough’, arguing that it followed slavishly the model of the Constitution of 1795 without taking into account the very

²² Maréchal, v, p. 331.

²³ Maréchal, p. 332.

²⁴ Maurice Dommanget, *Sylvain Maréchal l'égalitaire, l'homme sans dieu, sa vie, son oeuvre (1750-1803)* (Paris: Spartacus, 1950), pp. 357-360.

²⁵ See Giovanna Ceserani, ‘Classical Culture for a Classical Country: Scholarship and the Past in Vincenzo Cuoco’s *Plato in Italy*’, in *Classics and National Cultures*, ed. Susan A. Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 59-77.

²⁶ Cuoco, *Platone*, p. 101.

different cultural and economic conditions of the Neapolitan people.²⁷ After the fall of the Revolution, Cuoco insisted that if the revolutionaries had not ‘spoken an abstruse language that the people could not understand...perhaps...who knows? we would not be crying now over the poor remains of our destroyed homeland’.²⁸ As Vincenzo Ferrone has shown, Cuoco’s main target here is the political culture of rights of the Neapolitan Enlightenment, in particular the constitutionalism of Filangieri and later of Francesco Mario Pagano, author of the constitution of the short-lived Neapolitan Republic. The original defect of their philosophy, Cuoco maintained, was its reliance on a thoroughly abstract and artificial notion of ‘the people’ which disregarded the specific material and historical circumstances which allow the popular will of a nation to emerge and express itself.²⁹

Maréchal and Cuoco thus offer divergent yet complementary understandings of what constitutes an indigenous revolution, with Maréchal concentrating on the material conditions necessary for social regeneration and Cuoco on the cultural conditions, folk and popular cultural in particular. For both the return to a past more ‘primitive’ than recorded antiquity is a way of emphasizing the importance of an autochthonous revolution – that is to say, a revolution that is not imposed either from ‘above’ or from the ‘outside’ but from within, in the sense captured by the ancient Greek meaning of *autochthon* (literally: the self sprung from the soil, land, earth) with its associated implications of political equality (the myth of Athenian autochthony implied that since all citizens were born equal all therefore deserved equal access to

²⁷ Quoted in Casini, p. 245.

²⁸ Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana*, ed. by Anna Bravo (Turin: UTET, 1975), pp. 155-56.

²⁹ Ferrone, pp. 160-64

power).³⁰ In *Voyages*, Maréchal references Amphictyon, the Greek figure traditionally associated with autochthonous rule. This emphasis on the indigenous sources of liberty has led some commentators to attribute a nationalist agenda to the *Voyages*, noting for example that Pythagoras travels to Gaul where he discovers that the Druids have already achieved perfect freedom and social equality. But it is more accurate to describe Maréchal as a federalist. In his provocative open letter to Napoleon on the ‘Italian question’, also published in 1798, he warned those Italians sympathetic to the Revolution to be wary of Napoleon and any partial revolution that was ‘imposed’ from outside: ‘Peuples Italiques, ne vous hâtez pas de proclamer votre Bonaparte votre libérateur. Le voilà qu’il vous retire son bras invincible. Il vous trafique, il vous échange comme de vils bétails’. Blasting Napoleon for not liberating Italy from theocratic rule and for sacrificing the independence of Venice to the Austrians, he urges him instead to become the ‘fondateur d’une République universelle et fédérative’ and to be the ‘AMPHICTYON de notre siècle’.³¹ This is echoed in the *Voyages*, where Pythagoras advises the Italian peoples: ‘Nations italiques! honorez la mémoire d’Amphictyon, fils d’Hélenus, l’inventeur du lien fédératif qui porte son nom’.³² Indeed if Maréchal, in 1799, promotes the re-enactment of Pythagorean societies it is not just because of his long-standing commitment to the ideal of a small, communal society founded on natural law. It is also because the voluntary adherence to living in small, Pythagorean-style communes enables its followers to experience what has, in reality, become a distant, long-term political goal: that of a universal, federal republic.

³⁰ As the Athenians derived from the earth rather than an aristocracy of the four Ionian tribes, they all had equal claim to power. See Carol Dougherty, ‘Interpreting Myth’ in *A Companion to Ancient History*, ed. Andrew Erskine (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 154-163, pp. 158-9.

³¹ Maréchal, *Correctif à la gloire de Bonaparte ou lettre à ce Général* (Paris: Chez L’enfant: L’an VI), pp. 10 and 28.

³² Maréchal, *Voyages*, VI, p. 28.

Maréchal, then, retains a universalist, resolutely ahistorical, understanding of autonomy derived from his earlier convictions but inflects it with a new critique of revolutionary colonisation. Indigeneity, in this sense, evokes both the rights of the first occupant (understood to be irredeemably lost) and the still active natural rights of any self-organizing structure opposed to the state and, by extension, any ‘colonial’ power. Cuoco, in contrast, formulates a nascent nationalist, and strongly historicist, understanding of indigenous sources. The political impact of Pythagoreanism is discussed at length in three speeches by Archytas, the eminent philosopher and statesman who is Plato’s and Cleobolus’ host in Tarentum. There he explains how Pythagoras was able to win support by ‘using the language that best suited the people, that is with parables and proverbs’, and that he often ‘humoured popular prejudices in order to inspire love of truth’.³³ Archytas takes us behind the scenes of Pythagoras’ supposed prophecies and miracles, showing how popular credulity can be fruitfully manipulated to direct the masses toward justice and morality. Despite his materialist convictions, Pythagoras is said to have publicly endorsed traditional religion, on one occasion presenting himself to the people of Acragas as a messenger of God to persuade them to drive out the cruel tyrant Phalaris. This was possible because, as Archytas makes clear, ‘there was an inner and an outer doctrine. Only the latter was divulged to the people’.³⁴

THE MANY AND THE FEW

Both *Voyages* and *Platone* evoke the secrecy and exclusiveness of the Pythagorean sect as models of how to regulate the interface between the enlightened few and the popular masses. This brings us to the most prominent aspect of Pythagorean thought:

³³ Cuoco, *Platone*, p.79.

³⁴ Cuoco, *Platone*, p. 82.

his famous golden sayings, passed down through the generations and rumoured to contain a secret doctrine behind the symbolic form. At first glance, it is surprising to find two committed revolutionaries adopting the stratagem of a double doctrine. Yet, both Maréchal and Cuoco look to these sayings in order to reconcile their revolutionary idealism with a political realism borne out of defeat. Of course, the idea that citizens sometimes have to be deceived ‘for their own good’ has a long tradition in political philosophy. Championed by Machiavelli, among others, it had been the subject of much debate following the 1778 contest sponsored by Frederick II on the question: ‘Is it useful to deceive the people?’. Influential figures of the Enlightenment had tackled the issue both before and after the contest, and almost all took their lead from a much-cited passage of Plato’s *Republic*, in which Socrates suggests a ‘noble lie’ of a religious nature can be told to the people to kindle their patriotism.³⁵ Here we see the double doctrine put to new ends, not just to protect reformers and freethinkers but also to postpone the true revolution – as opposed to the Napoleonic version – for future generations.

Taking advantage of the fragmentary nature of the historical Pythagorean sayings, Maréchal proposes a large number of his own, many of them searing comments on the failure of the Revolution to accomplish its aims. Because a symbol refers both to itself and to something else (its figurative sense), Pythagoras was able to teach his doctrine without revealing or hiding it (‘sans la divulger et sans la cacher’), thereby restricting his teachings to the enlightened few while avoiding the

³⁵A selection of the submissions can be read in *Est-il utile de tromper le peuple?*, ed. by Werner Krauss (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966). On the same topic see also Voltaire, *Jusqu’à quel point on doit tromper le peuple* (1756), and Condorcet, *Est-il utile au peuple d’être trompé?* (1790). For a history of the ‘noble lie’ theory see Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 166-70.

pitfalls of lying to the many.³⁶ Double-speak is necessary, Maréchal argues, to ensure that Rousseau's distinction between 'de l'homme et des hommes' is maintained. The former, wise and measured, is capable of becoming a Republican; the latter, so many 'hommes-peuples' are to be treated as sheep – 'un troupeau qu'il faut mener doucement, mais, pour ainsi dire, à la baguette'.³⁷ Yet, Maréchal's invented Pythagorean sayings are also remarkably transparent, repeatedly evincing a misanthropy and anthropological pessimism in sharp contrast with his earlier egalitarian convictions: 'Ne parles point de liberté *au peuple*: riche, il est esclave de ses besoins factices; pauvre, il est l'esclave de ses besoins réels'³⁸; sois hérisson au milieu du peuple; ne lui laisse aucune prise sur toi³⁹ 'Homme sage! garde-toi des trois P: le Peuple, le Prince, le Prêtre'⁴⁰; 'dis la vérité aux hommes, et des *fables* aux peuples'.⁴¹

Cuoco echoes this insistence upon speaking to the people in fables and, like Maréchal, he is at pains to reconcile the practice of the 'noble lie' with his own democratic principles. He does so by saying that, for the Pythagoreans, recourse to deception is but a phase in a long-term progressive strategy for the improvement of human societies. 'Some truths', he explains, 'are destined one day to become universally known, but it is not prudent to divulge them too soon'. The task of the intellectual élites is to educate the public gradually, so as to protect the nation from

³⁶ Erica J. Mannucci stresses Maréchal's misgivings about the double doctrine in her 'Pitagora e la rivoluzione francese: Attualità politica ed eredità culturali in un viaggio immaginario nel Mediterraneo antico', *Mediterranea: Ricerche Storiche* 5 (2005): 480-1. See also Manucci, *Finalmente il popolo pensa: Sylvain Maréchal nell'immagine della Rivoluzione francese* (Naples, Guida: 2012), especially Ch.3.

³⁷ Maréchal, VI, pp. 13-14.

³⁸ Maréchal, p. 293

³⁹ Maréchal, p. 164.

⁴⁰ Maréchal, p. 279. Dommanget notes that this last is a twist on a favourite maxim from Maréchal's *Pensées libres sur les prêtres*: 'Garde-toi des 3 P: des Prêtres, des Princes et des Putains'.

⁴¹ Maréchal, p. 127.

both ‘torpor’ and ‘dangerous revolutions’.⁴² The ethics of lying for the public good is thus based on a timescale for gradual, controlled change by which social norms, beliefs, and political institutions all progress harmoniously and at the same pace. Cuoco was sympathetic to the liberal cause and was profoundly shaken by the useless martyrdom of the Neapolitan revolutionaries. However, he was convinced that once set in motion, the mechanism of revolution necessarily generated a set of new motives that were at odds with its original democratic aims. He saw revolution as a vicious circle in which the avant-garde, faced with popular hostility, ends up imposing their programme through violence, plunging society into anarchy and preparing the ground for an authoritarian ruler to emerge. Paradoxically, he argued, ‘the obsession with reforming everything brings about counterrevolution’.⁴³ The term ‘revolution’ appears rarely in *Platone* and is always negatively connoted. ‘It is not through revolutions or civil wars that one improves the future of cities and their citizens’ admonishes Archytas.⁴⁴ Cuoco’s preferred term is ‘riforma’, often coupled with its antonym ‘corruzione’. Manners, laws, religion, political systems, and even the arts are susceptible to corruption and might be in need of reform. Accordingly, the Pythagoreans are ‘grandi riformatori’ (great reformers) and ‘ordinatori’ (lawmakers). By endorsing reform and not revolution, Cuoco condemns political upheavals that make a tabula rasa of previous customs and institutions.

In contrasting ways, then, both Maréchal and Cuoco advocate a radical slowing-down of the revolutionary project. Cuoco was convinced that the key to a successful democratic transition was adapting abstract ideas of universal rights and liberties to the historical experience and internal rhythm of development of a given

⁴² Cuoco, *Platone*, p. 71.

⁴³ Cuoco, *Saggio storico*, p.96.

⁴⁴ Cuoco, *Platone*, p.178.

society. By contrast, Maréchal retained a fundamentally unhistorical or even anti-historical understanding of revolutionary change as a type of stasis, focusing exclusively on keeping alive a form of social organization based on the most minimal set of natural laws. For Maréchal a revolutionary state or nation is a contradiction in terms because only the individual who belongs to the smallest social unit can be truly autochthonous. Only these small groups can maintain an unmediated relationship to power and authority. In such small communities there is no need for double-speak because language itself is non-transitive. All rituals and norms reflect the presence of things close to hand (which Maréchal equates with the direct perception of natural phenomena, visible to all, such as the rising and setting of the sun; the eruptions of volcanoes). Since this primitive language is largely non-localizable, a golden age can be found just as well amongst the ancient Gauls as the Libyan Berbers (in other publications it will be native North Americans) – anywhere where man lives in accordance with nature. Indigeneity in this sense is a position that can also be assumed against any state or colonial structure, making Pythagoreanism both the most ancient and most contemporary of models.⁴⁵ However, given that Pythagoras founded schools in Italy, the relation between Gallic liberty and Italian antiquity becomes an important subject of conjecture. Here Maréchal overlaps directly with Cuoco's own concerns, warning the Italian people against adopting new-fangled laws (presumably revolutionary ones) in place of old maxims: 'Peuples italiques! vous demandez des lois nouvelles: tenez-vous-en à vos anciens *adages*'.⁴⁶

Yet despite their shared admiration of Pythagorean mottos, Cuoco would criticize this tendency to use them as a mouthpiece for one's own convictions. In a

⁴⁵ For suggestive parallels with Vico's theory of the law of internal development of different religions and cultures see Manuel, pp 160-63.

⁴⁶ Maréchal, VI, p. 21.

possible allusion to Maréchal, he criticizes those who exhibit their cleverness by coining new proverbs:

It's not difficult to make up such things. But to discover them in a people, recognize them, and build on them the edifice one wants to erect, making it eternal by grounding it on the very mind, heart, and life of a people: this is the work of a genius.⁴⁷

Following Vico, Cuoco believed institutions of early societies have their source in a pre-rational form of 'poetic wisdom', inspired by imagination and instinctive feelings of fear, piety and shame.⁴⁸ This way of understanding the world is expressed through 'favole', 'parabole' and 'proverbi' that appeal to the people's sense of wonder and their still underdeveloped cognitive faculty. The political lesson of Pythagoreanism is that reformers must learn to speak the 'language of the people' in order to secure popular support. Behind their oracular aura, the 'sentenze pitagoriche' are nothing but hard-headed moral precepts. Allegorical language lends authority and suggestion to these principles, enabling them to reach the popular subconscious and merge seamlessly into the traditional body of knowledge of a nation. Attempting to eradicate old beliefs and ways of life, as radicals had done, is a fatal mistake. The wisdom of Pythagoras consists not in abstract principles imposed from above but in new modulations of the everyday life and language that already belongs to the people.

The practice of grafting new ideas onto old values is consonant with the principle that the people can (and sometimes must) be lied to, and the naked truth can be shared only among the initiated. Like Maréchal, Cuoco's strategy is underpinned by a profoundly pessimistic view of the people as inherently self-interested, corrupt, and averse to change. Cuoco views democracy as the enemy of liberty and

⁴⁷ Maréchal, p. 80.

⁴⁸ Cuoco, *Platone*, pp. 57-8, 99-100, and 542.

progressive reform – there is no hope for enlightened reformers when ‘the scum of the people who have neither property, nor reason, nor virtue become arbiters of everything and are worshipped by the powerful’.⁴⁹ But even though he portrays the ‘volgo’ in overwhelmingly negative terms, Cuoco has no sympathy for self-righteous revolutionaries who have failed to gain popular support: ‘What’s the use of saying that the people are unjust? When their education is at stake, they have all the rights, and all the duties fall upon us, as well as all the blame’.⁵⁰ The book itself, written in a hybrid form that combines the popular genres of epistolary novel, travel narrative and ancient setting, is an attempt in this direction: for all its abstruseness and monotony, *Platone* was ‘intended primarily for the perusal of the people [*il volgo*]’.⁵¹

In different but nonetheless related ways, then, both Maréchal and Cuoco place all responsibility firmly on the side of the reformers, exposing the limitations that derive from a misguided sense of intellectual superiority. Despite their virtue and knowledge, the history of the Pythagoreans is punctuated with setbacks, when they are forced by tyranny or mob rule to withdraw from the public sphere into the secrecy of the schools. In moments of political failure, these secret societies incubate ideas and values that are passed on to the next generation, waiting for the propitious moment to bring them to the open. In contrast to revolutionary ardour, Cuoco and Maréchal put forward less attractive qualities of prudence and resilience, embracing slowness and an indefinite deferral of hope. Through the legend of Pythagoras, they write what we might call an archaeology of revolution, unveiling how human desire for change and improvement has been communicated across the centuries. This

⁴⁹ Cuoco, p. 178.

⁵⁰ Cuoco, p. 85.

⁵¹ Cuoco, p. 535. On the practical educational aims of the novel see Roberto Dainotto, ‘With *Plato in Italy*: The Value of Literary Fiction in Napoleonic Italy’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 72:3 (2011): 399-418.

lessens, at least in part, the intensity of their disappointment in the recent revolutions, which can now be refigured as momentary reversals in a slow but continuing progress that has its origins in a remote, almost mythological past.

CONCLUSION

As this comparative analysis makes clear, the revolutionary attempt to re-activate the ancient past did not end with the eighteenth century. If anything, references to antiquity became more experimental as they came to be identified with nationally specific images of society – whether in France under the Directory and Napoleon or in Italy's nascent revolutionary movements. Moreover, far from serving as mere 'décor', this turn to antiquity crucially involved a theoretical reflection on the nature of the revolutionary process. Both Maréchal and Cuoco turn to antiquity in order to deliberately shift the present onto a much larger and homogenous temporal scale that operates at a deeper level than the fluctuating course of 'event history' documented by traditional historiography. As Maréchal notes, what is at stake is the recovery of a certain 'esprit de l'antiquité', for which 'la chronologie n'y peut rien' and 'les usages, les mots populaires, et quelques monuments mutilés, apprennent plus de choses que des dates contradictoires'.⁵²

For Maréchal, of course, this 'esprit de l'antiquité' is radically undatable. Both because it expresses a deep time closer to the revolutions of nature than the events of human history (which he likens to mere 'foam') and because it can always be re-lived or as we might prefer to say today 're-enacted', in the form of self-organizing groups which keep this spirit alive. Cuoco, on the other hand, discovers the true spirit of history in the depth of folk memory and popular culture, and even in

⁵² Maréchal, VI, p. 5.

the geological structures of the land. As one of the Italic characters asks Cleobolus, ‘Do you really want to know how old we are? Read it here; it is written on our mountains, which are less deceitful than your annals’.⁵³ In this distant past they discover hidden truths about the origins and evolution of civilisation, which go fully against the grain of official accounts and perceptions of both the past and the recent revolutionary attempt to ‘make history’.

In their ambitious retellings of antiquity, then, both Cuoco and Maréchal embrace a deliberately non-synchronous understanding of historical time as consisting of different speeds. Both do so in order to resist the apparent course of history in which, as Maréchal’s Pythagoras notes, revolutions always arrive too early or too late. This method of reading the past in order to contrast the surface appearance of events with deeper, slowly evolving structures has overtones of what Hegel later would call the ‘dialectics of history’. And indeed Cuoco notes that ‘la dialettica’ is the distinctive feature of ancient Italian thought. In contrast to the ancient Greeks, Italian philosophers do not waste time in futile discussions about things in themselves, but acknowledge the natural inaccuracy of human thought. Thus defined, dialectics is what allows social reformers to slowly mould settled ideas and gradually, almost imperceptibly edge the people on towards democratic change. ‘A reformer of cities performs dialectics with many nations and many centuries’, says a Pythagorean philosopher to Cleobolus, ‘and his artifices are lost in the immensity of space and time’.⁵⁴ Dialectics here signifies the combination of transformation and stasis, openness and withdrawal, truth and deceit that shapes the reformers’ relation to the people, and enables them to effect staggering changes over an immense period of time.

⁵³ Cuoco, p. 483.

⁵⁴ Cuoco, p. 120.

Most strikingly perhaps, this comparative analysis reveals that even the most radical expressions of revolutionary rupture were formulated not as expressions of change per se, but in the name of a deeper continuity. Maréchal's self-instituting communes embrace a deep, nearly static time in which there is no difference between the most ancient past and the most recent present. In its collapse of historical time, Maréchal's anarchist vision of future revolutionary circles would prove particularly attractive to radicals in nations perceived to be out of 'out of sync' with European Enlightenment.⁵⁵ In an inverse operation, Cuoco's political realism extends the timeline for a successful revolution, which must not be conceived of as a single, violent event but as a geological process taking place over centuries and across the globe. In this universal perspective, personal disappointments, failure, and even wounded national pride all but dissolve in the rhythmic movement of world history. The peculiarity of Cuoco's thought resides precisely in what Roberto Esposito has called the 'genealogical vocation' of Italian philosophy, which 'has tended to tune in to the constitutive traits of the present by examining them in the light of deep roots'.⁵⁶ The comparison to Maréchal shows that this line of thought was not exclusively Italian. The search for ancient traces of 'natural', almost pre-historical forms of life and government intensifies at a moment when radical thinkers across Europe were faced with the dramatic possibility of a standstill of history, or even its reversal in the form of counter-revolution. It is in these formulations of nonhistoric continuity that we can perhaps also identify what is new. At a moment when antiquity was being

⁵⁵ James Billington has argued for the influence of this text on the Pythagorean sects that developed in Russia in the late eighteenth century, which he considers forerunners of the Russian radical tradition. *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers [1980]: 1999), pp. 104-5, 545. The *Voyages* were translated into German and Russian, with editions also in Basel, Breslau, Metz, Strasbourg and Vienna.

⁵⁶ Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 23.

historicized and made to reflect nationally-specific images of society, we also see how it came to stand for something historically intractable, a time that, if not exactly outside of history, at least opposes any straightforwardly linear understanding of historical development and progress.